

Montgomery County Council
FY24 Constant Yield Tax Rate Hearing
May 2, 2023
Testimony of Melissa McKenna

My name is Melissa McKenna. This Operating Budget is stickier than most so I decided to sit out those hearings. However, the discussion continued and, as a 10-year education advocate, I couldn't resist this opportunity to address you on the topic.

The Education First Budget of 2016 has become the engine of what is now a runaway train of budget requests exceeding Maintenance of Effort (MOE). Since 2017, MOE has been exceeded every year since; whether nominally, \$349,430 for FY22; or flagrantly, \$86,409,225 for FY23.

The current request to exceed MOE in FY24 by more than \$272M is stunning. Even for me. Forget just this year, that's IN PERPETUITY! Is that a sustainable amount? Should it be?

Being a frugal consumer myself, I have to question what this will buy and what is the expected return on investment. We all know that the effects of the COVID-19 were devastating, especially for our children. And it is **OUR children**, other people's children, that brings me here today. They only get one shot!

Don't forget that MCPS was also awarded more than \$389M in Federal ESSER funding. As of January 31, 2023, \$154M remains and is available until September 2024. What happens next year when this one-time waterfall of money dries up?

Where did that ESSER money go? Let's take tutoring: \$27M reached 12,000 students. Do we know that it reached the students that needed it the most: Black and Brown, financially challenged, or the differently abled?

Don't misunderstand. Do I believe our teachers and support staff should be paid more? ABSOLUTELY! However, at some point, like any household budget, there are some hard decisions to be made. We've reached that point. Instead of more add ons, current spending must be scrutinized.

As one of Dr. McKnight's biggest supporters, I want to emphasize she has inherited a bureaucracy more like the County Government than a mom and pop shop in Old Town Gaithersburg. Making changes at MCPS is like attempting a U-turn with the Titanic. Programs systemwide need to be reevaluated, and some cancelled. My suggestion for them is the Innovative School Year programs at Roscoe R. Nix and Arcola Elementary Schools. They have high rates of summer absenteeism and persistent staff turnover, and would be better served by less costly alternatives such as summer school and Excel Beyond the Bell.

For a \$6M investment, just in staff, not including increased facility operations and maintenance costs, what would you expect the results in reading achievement to look like?

(Costs derived from Schools at a Glance for years 2018-2019 through 2021-2022.

<https://ww2.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/sharedaccountability/glance/>)

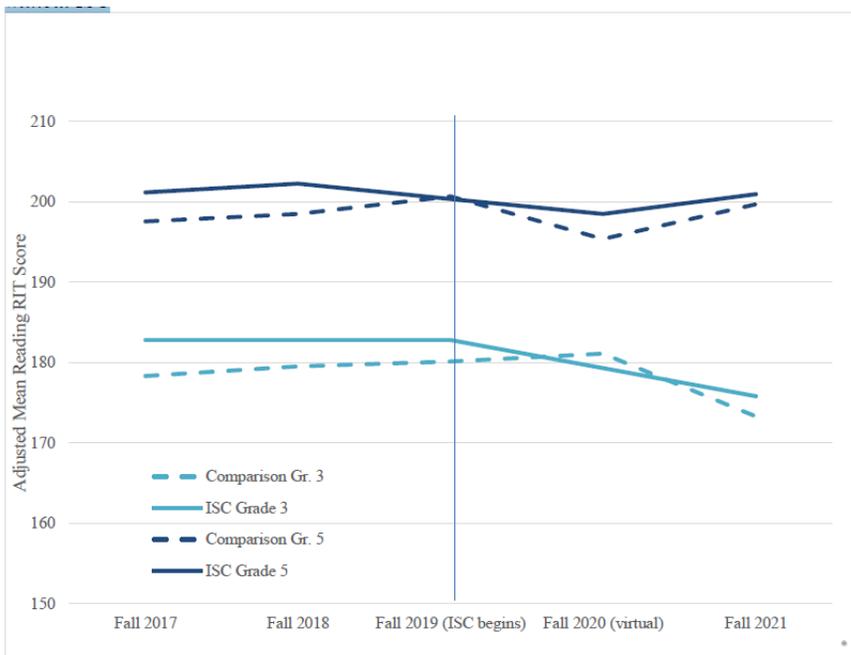


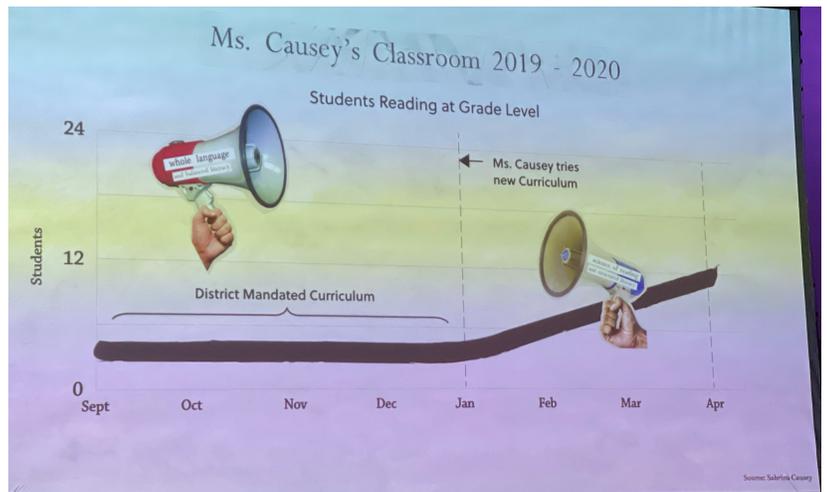
Figure 2. Grades 3 and 5 Mean Reading MAP RIT scores over five years for Innovative School Calendar schools and Schools without Innovative School Calendar.

[Opening of Innovative Schools, MCPS, July 26, 2022.](https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/mcpsmd/Board.nsf/files/CGKVDN804301/$file/Opening%20Innovative%20Schls%20220726.pdf)

[https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/mcpsmd/Board.nsf/files/CGKVDN804301/\\$file/Opening%20Innovative%20Schls%20220726.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/mcpsmd/Board.nsf/files/CGKVDN804301/$file/Opening%20Innovative%20Schls%20220726.pdf)

To be fair, an entire generation of kids have been “taught” to read the wrong way. MCPS is making the transition to the Science of Reading but it's not fast enough.

Compare that with the results of a first-grade teacher in the South so frustrated by the lack of results from her district's Whole Language reading curriculum that she created her own Science of Reading curriculum. Mind you, this was during the pandemic when schools were closed and virtual learning was the only option. (from the film *The Right to Read*. <https://www.therighttoreadfilm.org>)



Considering all the talk about housing affordability in the County, I must call out the glaring incongruity of raising property taxes while legislating caps on rent increases. How does increasing property taxes make home ownership more affordable? As I'm sure you've heard from others before me, property values have risen considerably in the past two years of reassessments, (<https://dat.maryland.gov/Pages/Assessment-Reports.aspx>) creating to a natural rise in revenue available. There will be a limit to the tax burden those who are able to shoulder it will accept.

MCPS alone cannot solve all our students' problems. Our children have suffered. Kids are falling behind academically, social-emotionally, and all other ways, nationally. Throwing more money at something doesn't guarantee success.

Whatever the outcome of your budgetary decision, I urge the County Council to hold MCPS accountable for assigning resources to students with the greatest need so they can recover from the pandemic. The support needed by these students should not be subject to any budget cuts.

Thank you.

Melissa McKenna